

Collecting in Sicily in the Spring of 1977 and 1978

By ANTHONY VALLETTA, F.R.E.S.*

I arrived at the airport of Catania on the 23rd April at 1.15 a.m.; not a very convenient time, and had to spend the rest of the night in an hotel, and the morning in Catania. After lunch my friend Sig. Sebastiano Distefano drove me to my favourite hotel at Zafferana on the slopes of Mount Etna at 800m. As the weather was not very encouraging, nothing could be done that afternoon.

Sunday 24th: After breakfast we collected until noon close to the hotel, where the first butterflies to come my way were *Anthocharis cardamines turritiferens* Vty., *Pieris napi meridionalis* Heyne, *Leptidea sinapis sartha* Ruhl. and *Glauropsyche alexis* Poda, all males. I understood from the people at the hotel that the previous week was quite cold and wet.

On the 25th, I went lower down, hoping to find a warmer locality, but still very few butterflies were on the wing, mostly *P. rapae* L., *Coenonympha pamhilus* L., *Pararge aegeria sardoa* Vty. and *P. megera australis* Vty.

The 26th was a warmer morning with a clear sky. I went up to 1,000m and kept on the sunny side of the road, which was a mass of flowers, mostly *Vicia cracca*, *Geranium sanuineum*, *Isatis tinctoria*, *Lupinus hirsutus*, *Valeriana officinalis* and *Turritis glabra*. Quite a selection of butterflies were visiting these flowers: *A. cardamines*, *A. damone* Boisd., *Euchloe ausonia romana* Cal., *P. manni* todaroana Pincit, *C. crocea* Fourc., *A. agestis calida* Bell, *P. icarus* Rott. and *G. alexis* Poda. The following day I collected in the same area, finding species of the previous day on the increase, and also *Iphiclides podalirius* L. and *Lycaena phlaeas* L. In the afternoon, I left Zafferana and drove down to Catania, where I stayed in an hotel until the 3rd May.

On the 28th, I decided to take the coach which passes the hotel on its way to Mt. Etna, and stop at an altitude of about 800m beyond Nicolosi, to try an area where I had not collected before. The conductor was obliging by letting me pay at my destination, as he could not understand where I wanted to go. At a crossroad, a gentleman stopped the coach to get down and I decided to do the same. This kind person, thinking that I was somewhat confused and upset, asked me where I wanted to go, and on hearing that I had no particular place in mind, but that I wanted to take a few butterflies, smiled, introduced himself, and asked me to join him. He was spending the day at his summer villa where, he said, there were many butterflies, and that I could take a rest in the villa when I wanted to, and then go back with him at 3.00 p.m. to catch the coach back to Catania. "Birds of a feather flock together" the saying goes. I discovered that he was an educationalist too, so we found a topic for conversation on the way.

It was about 9.00 a.m. and most of the insects were still resting at that height, but taking a short cut through a rough

* 257 Msida Street, B'Kara, Malta.

meadow I disturbed a couple of Owlflies, *Ascalaphus coccajus* D. & S. (Neuroptera: Ascalaphidae), which settled down again. As we walked on, I noticed more and more of this insect, still resting with wings held over the body like a roof and wrapped round the body below with the abdomen sticking up in a peculiar manner. It seems that this area was their favourite habitat, for when the day got warmer, I came across large numbers flying about with a characteristic rapidity and combination of whirring and gliding. I also noticed that they ascended vertically, and when tired, dropped parachute-like to settle with wings outspread on the vegetation; it is then that one can approach them, which is very difficult when they are on the wing owing to their rapid and zig-zag flight.

As my companion had said, the locality was a very good one, as nowhere had I come across 15 species of butterflies in so small an area. The most common species was *Melitea phoebe* D. & S. followed by *Cyaniris semiargus* Rott.; other species were *Zerynthia polyxena latevittata* Vrtv., rather worn for this time of the year, *P. icarus* Rott., *L. phlaeas* L., *G. alexis* Poda, *C. pamphilus* L., *P. megera australis* Vrtv., *P. aegeria sardoa* Vrtv., *V. cardui* L., *V. atalanta* L., *P. rapae* L. *E. ausonia romana* Pinckt, *A. damone*, *A. cardamines turritiferens* Vrtv. and *P. malvoides modestior* Vrtv.; *Arctia villica* L., *Lithostege duponcheli* Prout, *Chiasma clathrata* L. subsp. *aurata* Turati and a *Procris* sp. were also seen. It was in this area that I took for the first time, quite accidentally, a Snakefly, *Raphida notata* Fabr. (Neuroptera: Raphididae) when I netted a *M. phoebe* that was resting.

On the 29th, I stayed at Catania for a rest and at the same time visited my friends at the Instituto di Biologia Animale of Catania. On the 30th, I again took the coach to Mt. Etna and stopped at an altitude of 1,180m at a place called Mount St. Leo, and walked down to a height of 850m collecting on the way. Other species not taken on the 28th were: *P. machaon* L., *L. boeticus* L., *Lycenopsis argiolus* L., *C. rubi* L., and the colourful Arctiid *Hiporita jacobaeae* L. which was very common. On Sunday, 1st May, I collected on the outskirts of Belpasso at a height of 700-800m. Very few butterflies were on the wing, but I managed to take *I. podalirius* L., *Philotes baton* Bergstr. and *Adoepa lineola clara* Tutt. On May 2nd, I worked with another collector, Sig. Gino Gulli, whom I had met in the summer of 1976. On the outskirts of Belpasso 800m not far from the area I visited on the 28th April, I saw *I. podalirius* L., *Limenitis reducta* Stgr., *P. napi* L., and *L. lavatherae* Esp. The *Ascalaphus* were still on parade, chasing the myriads of mosquitoes which were infesting the atmosphere. I was so pleased because for the first time, I found several fully fed larvae of *E. ausonia* on *Isatis tinctoria*: these pupated while I was still in Sicily, and the butterflies emerged just a year later.

On the 3rd, I stayed at Catania, as I had to meet Mr. H. G. Allcard at the air port on his arrival from England to join

me for a week. On the 4th, he and I went to the hotel at Zafferana and collected at a height of 1,000m. *A. damone*, especially females were on the wing together with *L. sinapis*, *A. cardamines* and *G. alexis* among other species already mentioned.

On the 5th we drove down to Valle San Giacomo 350m. Here *C. pamphilus*, *P. icarus* and *A. agestis* were the most common species, but we also came across *P. napi* and *P. malvoides*. On Friday 6th we collected at 1,100m towards Mt. Etna, where *E. ausonia*, *C. rubi*, *C. crocea* and a single *A. damone* were seen. On the 7th we drove to Randazzo 765m on the west side of Mt. Etna, so we had to pass through Lingua-glossa, a rather long way along large plantations of hazel nuts. The locality is a very good one for *A. damone*, and in fact we saw it flying while we were still in the car. There also, we came across *I. podalirius*, *Heodes alciphron gordius* Sulzer and *V. cardui*, as well as most of the other species already seen in other localities. On the 8th, we did very little collecting, as the weather was not encouraging.

On the 9th we left early for Randazzo, where we stayed until 2.00 p.m. It was a really good day with no less than 25 species on the wing, including *Aporia crataegi* var., *augusta* Trti. *Pararge maera* L. (which I had not taken before), *M. phoebe*, *P. daplidice*, *P. machaon*, *Z. polyxena*, *I. podalirius*, *C. semiargus* and *Aglais urticae*. We again saw *A. coccaius* but both males and females were mostly of the white form. On the 10th, we drove to Nicolosi, 698m to the west of Zafferana: 14 species were seen, but nothing new; however, we noticed that the two arctiids, *A. villica* and *H. jacobaeae* were very common there.

Every evening after supper, while the waiters were still clearing the tables, we sampled the moths that came to the windows of the dining room. In this way, we collected the following: *Stauropus fagi* L., *Notodonta trepida* Esp. (*anceps* Goeze), *Agrotis nigricans* L., *Chloridea dipsacea* L., *Synthymia monogramma* Hübn., *Bafia illunaris* Hübn., *Phragmatobia fuliginosa* L., *Plusia chrysitis* L., *Hadena lutea* D. & S., *Xylomyges conspicillaris* L., *Grammodes stolidus* Feb., *Gnophos onustaria* H.Sch., *Eupithecia centaureata* D. & S., *E. venosata* Fab., *Anaitis plagiata* L., *Idaea seriata* Schrk., *Crocallis elinguarina* L., *Rhodostrophia vibicaria* Cl., *Metrocampa honoraria* D. & S., *Selenia lunaria* D. & S., *Aspitates ochrearia* Rossi., *Boarmia gemmaria* Brahm., *Epirrhoe rivata* Hübn. and *Itame spodiaria* Lefeb.

SPRING 1978

February and March in Malta were very mild and sunny, so much so that by the 20th February 16 out of the 19 species of butterflies found on the island were already on the wing, and the only hibernating species, *G. cleopatra*, was seen laying in my garden on its favourite, *Rhamnus alaternus*. Later, a collector friend told me that Sicily was also enjoying this glorious weather, and that on the 26th March *A. cardamines*,

A. damone, *E. ausonia* and *Z. polyxena* were already flying. Unfortunately, April proved to be otherwise. For more than three weeks, the central Mediterranean was in a continuous low pressure belt, with strong winds and overcast sky, and very cold for the time of year. Notwithstanding, I decided to go to Sicily for my annual trip there, and hoping for the best, took the boat, this time to Catania. In fact, the day was quite promising, with sun all the time and a calm sea for this seven hour crossing I was delighted to see a tired migratory greenfinch join the group on board when out at sea, and a bit later, another bird crossed the deck, but this one seemed fit enough to make the trip unaided. I was earlier joined by an English entomologist friend, Dr. P. Willcox, and just after 7p.m. continental time, we entered the port of Catania, where we drove straight to the hotel at Zafferana, ready for a good supper and a night's rest.

On the 27th, a clear day, but with some gusts of wind, we tried our luck and collected up to 900m on the slope above the hotel. The first butterfly we saw was *G. cleopatra*, followed by an *E. ausonia* and a couple of *C. pamphilus*. We went to a sheltered lane and disturbed several *Z. polyxena*. As the day warmed up, the wind became stronger and no butterflies dared to fly, so we went back to the hotel.

Friday 28th, an exceptionally fine day, sunny and warm, and no breeze; we tried a higher place up to 1,100m. Here *Z. polyxena* was flying in the shade of almond trees, and *A. cardamines* of both sexes flew from flower to flower. The lycaenids, *P. icarus*, *A. agestis* and *L. phlaeas* were quite common. On our way back, we saw *A. damone* laying on *Isatis tinctoria*, its favourite plant.

After breakfast on the 29th my friend Sig. S. Distefano called at the hotel and drove us to the Monti Peloritani in the province of Messina. We went through Linguaglossa, Castiglione di Sicila, Francavilla di Sicilia, crossed the River Alcantra several times and collected at different heights from 310m, 480m to 1,105m, always keeping by the road V.V. No. 185. The mountains were a mass of trees, mostly pines, "Oasi di Pini". The commonest butterfly was *P. napi*, mostly males, and without the black discoidal spot showing. *I. podalirius* was seen several times, but was difficult to take; also on the wing were *A. damone*, *A. cardamines*, *Z. polyxena* and *P. aegeria*. It has been said that *A. damone* is only found on the slopes of Mt. Etna in Sicily, so that the appearance of this species so many kilometres away in a different province indicated that it may have extended its range. By 2.00 p.m. we reached Novara di Sicilia, a small picturesque town. There was not a soul in the streets, but hundreds of swallows were seeing to their nests. We managed to find a small restaurant there where we had lunch and a rest while sipping the local wine. On the way to Messina, we saw *G. cleopatra*, *C. crocea*, and its var. *helice*, also several *V. cardui*. Again we stopped at a small town, San Biagio, and went to a bar to have a cup of coffee. The lady who

served us told us that the people in that locality were still sleeping outside, after the earthquake tremors they had recently experienced; and that 52 bottles of spirits were shaken down from the shelves in her bar when they had the first shaking. Arriving at Messina, we took the autostrada to Taormina and then to Giarre, when, to our surprise, we noted that Etna was in eruption again, through a new opening 2,950m above. As it was getting dark, we could see some large flames coming out, and two streams of red lava flowing down the Valle del Bove. This eruption kept increasing, and up to the 3rd, whilst we were still at Zafferana, we could hear rumbles now and again, and every morning we walked on black sand as we came out from the hotel.

On Sunday the 30th, owing to the eruption, there was too much traffic on the road to Etna, so we stayed close to the hotel and collected at some 900 metres in different enclosures, wherever wild flowers were blooming. Again *Z. polyxena* was seen flying very near to the ground; an additional species turned out to be *L. argiolus*. Monday the 1st of May was a public holiday — as elsewhere, it is customary for families to go out for the day. The roads were packed with all sorts of vehicles, and it took us four hours in a Land Rover from Zafferana to Necropoli di Pantalica in the province of Syracuse. We tried to collect at a height of 425m at a place called “Il Palazzo del Principe” where the vegetation was mostly *Asphodelus fistulosus*, *A. lutea*, *Ornithogalum nutans* and a variety of vetches and thistles. Hardly had we arrived at this locality when the sky became overcast, and a sudden shower made us return to our car. Later, we disturbed a few *C. pamphilus*, *L. phlaeas* and *P. icarus*, also one *C. crocea*. The only two moths were *N. noctuella* and *A. efformata*. The return journey was quicker as we drove along an old road, but the bumping was awful in places owing to potholes which could not be avoided in the dark.

Tuesday the 2nd was rather windy day with some thick clouds. We drove to a favourite spot some 42km away towards Adrano, 560m on the west coast of Etna, and in a sheltered lane full of wild flowers, we came across *A. damone*, *E. ausonia*, *P. rapae* and *P. brassicae*, *A. agestis* and *A. cardamines*. As it became colder the wind grew stronger, we drove back to the hotel. In the past we had taken some 15 species from this locality, including *A. crataegi*, *G. cleopatra*, *I. podalirius*, *P. manni* and other blues, but this time we could only find six species.

The 3rd was a very hot day. We collected in a small wood at a height of 700m close to the hotel as we had to leave that afternoon to return to Catania. Still, we took a couple of *A. damone* and two very tiny specimens of *A. cardamines*, and saw *Inachis io* L. We spent the 4th visiting some interesting places in Catania and at the Institute, and left the following day at noon, reaching Malta at 11.00 p.m. after a long stop at Syracuse.

Our thanks are due to Sig. S. Distefano and to his cousin Franco, who were very helpful companions, and to the Director of the institute for providing transport when it was required.

References

- Mariani, Mario, 1939. Fauna Lepidopterorum: *Mem. Soc. Ent. Ital.*, 17: 129-187.
- Verity, Ruggiero, 1940-1953. *Le Farfalle Diurne d'Italia*, Vol. I-V.
- Sichel, Giovanni, 1963. Quarto Contributo alla Conoscenza della fauna Ropalocerica Etna. *Considerazioni Zoogeografiche Estratto dagli atti dell'Accademia Nazionale Italiana di Entomologia Rendiconti*, Anno X 1962, 113-116.
- Chinery, Michael, 1973. *A Field Guide to the Insects of Britain and Northern Europe*. Collins.

PRACTICAL HINTS — OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

In October, pupae of the Red-necked Footman (*Atolmis rubricollis* L.) occur in great abundance on the Scilly Isles in flimsy silken cocoons under the bark of old pines and cypresses; towards the end of the month some larvae are still around (GOATER).

Imagines of the very variable *Nycteola revayana* Scop. may be beaten out of thick cover — Yew, Spruce, Ivy or dead oak branches — in oak woods throughout the winter, November and December being my favourite months. If the weather is warm they may fly a short distance and a companion may be helpful. (To quote Fassnidge "A wife is useful because you can curse her if she misses them".) If it is cold they either sit on the tray or, in very cold weather, drop straight into it (A. RICHARDSON).

November is a good time to find larvae of *Aethes smeathmanniana* F. in the dead seed-heads of *Achillea millefolium* (Yarrow) growing on roadside verges, rough grassland, the borders of fields, etc. The larvae live in a silk tube the outline of which is usually quite easy to see. Put collected material in a flower-pot, cover securely with fine netting such as an old nylon stocking and leave out of doors throughout the winter. Examine periodically for the presence of spiders. Bring indoors in the second half of May and moths should appear from the first week in June onwards (W. A. C. CARTER).

In early November and late October, mines of most of the *Phyllonorycter* species may be gathered on a variety of foodplants. The leaves are best kept out of doors all winter, but some species which pass the winter as larvae within the mine, are particularly prone to drying out and to mechanical damage such as leaf folding. For this reason, I find that if the leaves are placed within plastic cups to give physical protection, and these latter are tied into stockings so that they may be hung in the garden or outhouse, high success rates are achieved with all species. The leaves may be brought in at any time after the New Year to give one something to do at a time when little else is on the wing (WATKINSON).